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## **A spectacle of death? Reading dead bodies in Tain Bo Cuailnge II**

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# A Spectacle of Death? Reading Dead Bodies in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* II

Sarah Künzler

## Abstract

Although at times despicable to modern tastes, violence, killing and death are essential parts of medieval heroic literature and integral in shaping the heroic world of a text. This article investigates how certain dead bodies in Recension II of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*TBC* II) are read within the heroic discourse of *fir fer* and in relation to the posthumous reputation of a warrior, his *fama*. It argues that some corpses can become signs, purposefully ‘installed’ by Cú Chulainn and read (that is, interpreted to deduce information) by his adversaries, and that these episodes may instigate a critical engagement with the idea of reading bodies in *TBC* II. In order to contextualise the close readings of four carefully selected passages, some remarks on the discourse of violence and heroic combat in *TBC* II precede the individual analyses. To conclude, the importance of visually observing the dead bodies is stressed and paired with the idea of ‘specularity’, recently introduced to Irish studies by Sarah Sheehan (in relation to live bodies). The article thus discusses not just individual textual passages but also more general ideas about reading bodies in early Irish literature.

In the past decade, academic discourses of various disciplines have discussed bodies and the related concept of embodiment as the ‘existential ground of culture and self’, as Thomas J. Csordas (1994, 4) has phrased it.<sup>1</sup> In the wake of Judith Butler’s ground-breaking analyses (1990, 1993), humanities research has come to view bodies as social constructs rather than (purely) biological entities and they have occupied an important position in social discourse(s). Links between bodily appearance and social concerns can also be observed in some medieval texts, albeit in different forms and contexts due to the vastly different nature of the sources. In some instances, however, it can be argued that the bodies of literary characters are described in a certain fashion in order to engage with particular social or cultural concerns of the narrated world, i.e. the world created by and hence depicted in a text.<sup>2</sup> In the following analyses, the term ‘to install’ will be used to express that

1 For an elaboration of the argument see Csordas, 1990.

2 Several detailed analyses can be found in the forthcoming publication of my PhD thesis. The term ‘narrated world’, which is closely modelled on the German concept of *erzählte Welt*, emphasises that this fictive reality is continuously and deliberately created throughout a text and that a text can depict a symbolic universe independent of (but perhaps still influenced by) the historic world of medieval Ireland.

bodies in literary texts can be deliberately and purposefully described or appointed to fulfil certain functions or raise particular issues. The term is useful regardless of whether the bodies are actively and deliberately set up by another character, or merely installed through emphasis within a text. Furthermore, there is often a subsequent deduction of meaning from these bodies (whether narrated or implied) within a text. As this deduction of information within the text is conscious and culturally dependent, the term ‘reading’ provides a convenient shorthand to denote this process in the study of literary texts.<sup>3</sup>

Yet across the disciplines, the majority of studies concerned with such issues seem to engage solely with live bodies. With the exception of the walking dead, dead bodies, on the other hand, are perceived as static and non-performative and have generated less academic interest. However, on closer examination it emerges that in some cases, dead bodies can be seen as equally powerful mediators: they can be installed just as purposefully as live bodies are, even if the ways in which bodies are installed and read appear considerably different in each case.

By discussing several examples from the twelfth-century Recension II of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (henceforth *TBC II*), it can be examined for which purposes dead bodies may be used as signifying entities in early Irish heroic literature.<sup>4</sup> The *Táin* suggests itself for this kind of study because it contains a relatively high number of deaths and hence dead bodies—thanks to Cú Chulainn—while the limitation to Recension II allows for a more coherent analysis in the space of an article. It is important to first briefly outline my understanding of *TBC II*’s general discourse of killing and dead bodies, while in a second step some extraordinary depictions of dead bodies can then be discussed in contextualised, close readings. Situating the discussion in the larger context of the text’s portrayal of dead bodies is important in order to argue that only in very exceptional cases, which are noticeable as much for their literary merit as for their engagement with particular issues, are dead bodies (openly or implicitly) read by other characters.

It is hardly surprising that in these specific instances in *TBC II*, the dead bodies are presented and perceived firmly within heroic discourse. It can therefore be argued that these corpses are important not as biological entities but as part of the social and cultural discourses of the narrated world. In the examples discussed here, the bodies are read specifically within the discourse of proper heroic conduct, *fír fer*. In addition, the bodies of the just-deceased warriors mark the transitional point from life to death, from acquiring fame (through martial action) to their fame

3 In order to avoid confusion about who is interpreting a body, the term ‘to read’ will be used only for the intradiegetic readings, i.e. the readings by other characters within the text, while ‘to interpret’ will be used to denote my own, extradiegetical close readings.

4 All subsequent references to the text will be based on Cecile O’Rahilly’s 1969 edition and translation of *TBC II* (see bibliography) and will hence also follow her orthography.

being transmitted in posterity as *fama*, as the lasting memory of a warrior and his (or her) deeds. Or in other words: the episodes show the precarious nature of the transition from the fame acquired by one body (i.e. a warrior) to the mouths and minds of many others. Because the bodies discussed here are located at the threshold of the hugely important concepts of fame and *fama*, it is possible that they critically engage with ideas about heroic behaviour, the acquisition of fame and its transmission after a warrior's death. If it is assumed that these dead bodies are not just an expression of the text's heroic mentality but that they are part of the discourse that creates, reaffirms or perhaps even questions such standards, their study becomes even more important in relation to the narrated worlds of early Irish heroic texts such as *TBC* II.

Underlying the following arguments is the belief that in early Irish literature bodies are read intradiegetically—by other characters and hence 'within' the text—and that the depictions of their physical appearance also help the extradiegetic audience to ascertain a character's social position and narrative function. Studies by Amy Mulligan (2005) and Damian McManus (2009) have shown a conscious pairing of social status and physical appearance in their respective corpora. My PhD research suggests that similar ideas can also be discerned in other early Irish texts. Yet while such a reading of live bodies seems widespread, the same way of installing and reading cannot be assumed for dead bodies in *TBC* II and elsewhere. For instance, in *TBC* II live bodies are prominent for the detailed enumeration of physical features that often provide a clear picture of a character's appearance. Dead bodies are almost never visualised in terms of their looks (not even in relation to their fatal wounds, which are at times mentioned briefly) but are most prominently remarked on in relation to their position or positioning in death. Although it can be argued that both kinds of bodies are read, this suggests that corpses are installed in different ways and for different purposes. It also suggests that corpses are subject to a different kind of reading: they are perceived more in a monumental way and are read as static signs situated in the landscape. Their (apparently!) immobile nature becomes one of the most defining features of the reading, even though (as will be argued below) this might not be as reliable as initially thought. To keep these differences in mind is crucial for discussing the instalment and reading of dead bodies in its own right, but a brief look at *TBC* II's discourse of violence is also necessary to fully contextualise the passages discussed below.

Although perhaps at times despicable to modern tastes, wounding, bloodshed and killing are essential parts of medieval heroic tradition. As Cú Chulainn holds back the Connacht army on his own for most of their invasion, *TBC* II features few large-scale battle-scenes but a long and prominent series of single-combat

fights.<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Lowe (2003, 85–86) has argued that ‘the very narrative is woven around a succession of death tales that are at turns exciting, spectacular, humorous and banal’. In virtually all heroic cultures, as Philip O’Leary (1987, 5) stresses, single-combat was the honourable way to fight and ‘unequal fights are regularly condemned in the literature’, such as is the case in *TBC II* when Cú Chulainn is forced to fight and kill superior numbers. The term used to denote such genuinely heroic fighting in *TBC II* and elsewhere in early Irish literature is *fir fer*, which literally means ‘truth of men’ but is more colloquially rendered as ‘(rules of) fair play’. O’Leary (1987, 1) supposes that in early Irish literature, such standards of right and wrong were traditional, external, and public, determined and imposed by the society, with shame and disgrace the major sanctions and honour and glory the ultimate rewards. For the hero, public honour and glory was accessible only through aggressive competition, particularly the exercise of warrior prowess at the expense of others. The public witnessing—*seeing*—of the production of honour and subsequent (usually) public proclamation of honour as well as shame are therefore hugely important to the hero for ascertaining his status *as* a hero during his lifetime, and presumably also to guarantee his *fama* in lore and history after his death.

In relation to German Arthurian epics, Heiko Fiedler-Rauer (2003, 9) has termed this idea *Kämpfe als Kulturfunktion* (‘combats as cultural devices’). Fiedler-Rauer (2003, 9) maintains that from this point of view, the regulation of violence (or perceived lack of regulation) is central in establishing heroic identity. O’Leary’s studies (1987, 1991) have proven a similar function of combats and a comparable concern for heroic codes in the early Irish tradition. It can thus be argued that portrayals of violence in medieval literature allow for a nuanced perception of the cultural codes prevalent in a particular literary tradition or even a particular text. In fact, Regine Reck (2010, 8) has drawn attention to the fact that ‘there can be profound differences in presentation [of combat], and this phenomenon of course begs the question about their respective functions’. Despite these acknowledgements of the cultural significance of combat in literary texts, William Layer (2010, 192) has rightly pointed out that studies which link the significance of regulated, symbolically charged violence to the body of the victim are still astonishingly rare. The present article thus tries to make a first, tentative link between the performative and the corporeal codes of violence in *TBC II*.

One possible reason why corpses have not (yet) played a major role in studies of *TBC II* may be because the text does not generally foreground dead bodies. As Ó Cathasaigh (2013, 132) found, ‘violence to the body in the *Táin* is presented

5 That is, of course, unless the Connacht invaders breach noble conduct and attack him in groups or Cú Chulainn resorts to guerrilla tactics, instances which deserve attention in their own right.

in discourse that is replete with bodily images and references'. The text does not (generally) exploit the potential 'aesthetics' of poetic visual descriptions of blood and gore, but these are reserved for particularly emotional episodes, such as Cú Chulainn's fight against his foster-brother Fer Diad. Mostly, the bodies of Cú Chulainn's opponents are a mere target for the accurately executed and pointedly described feat: it is described where exactly the body is hit by what feat or weapon but not how this affects the body in terms of bleeding or the splashing of organs. Hence the enemy's body appears predominantly 'as the agent and target of martial activity', as William Sayers (1985, 34) phrased it in his characterisation of the warrior function.

These points can be observed for both Recension I and II of *TBC*. Despite being the 'Mittelpunkt der irischen Heldensage etwa vom 8.-11. Jahrhundert', as Thurneysen (1921, 96) has characterised it, the *Táin* in fact shows relatively little interest in the description of wounded or dead bodies if compared with other European heroic epics. This holds true both from the point of view of aesthetic effects of corpses and of a possible moral-reflexive engagement with them. As Patricia Kelly (1992, 92) formulated it: 'it is no concern of the tale to glorify war'. Rather, it aims to critically engage with heroic prerogatives and perhaps even, as J. N. Radner (1982, 55) suggested, emphasises the negative effects of war.<sup>6</sup> A third point to note is that in most single-combat fights, it is highly controlled feats that are foregrounded, not simple bodily strength or mindless attacks. Hence the bodies are subject to specific rather than all-encompassing assaults. However, these general observations just make the examples discussed here all the more noticeable. Such approaches to the study of the *Táin* from an episodic perspective echo Sayers' (1985, 31) opinion that 'the *Táin* as we have it is an episodic work, and the importance of many episodes is in their relevance to central themes rather than in any contribution to the delineation of character or the progress of the narrative.' Approaching the text from this angle might help to explain why in certain cases—and in those cases only—dead bodies do become foregrounded.

In the following close readings, two different types of installing and reading dead bodies will be discussed. Both highlight the prevalence of specific, deeper concerns connected with these particular dead or dying heroes. The two kinds of installing and reading dead bodies may be divided by Cú Chulainn's attitude towards the corpses, as well as by their importance for the *fama* of the deceased warrior. In the first group of examples, dead bodies are read by other characters in terms of how they are positioned in the landscape. The implied aim is to extract clues as to how the warriors died. This is of major importance in establishing and confirming the posthumous fame of a hero if the fight itself was—apparently—not

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6 A possible exception to this is the corpse of Etarcomol which, as Carney (1995, 120–130) has suggested, may well be a rendering of Hector's death in the *Illiad*.

observed. The deaths of the warrior Lóch mac Mo Febis (ll. 1962–2011) as well as of Cú Chulainn's foster-brother Fer Diad (ll. 2606–3596) are suitable examples to illustrate this. Secondly, dead bodies may be consciously installed by Cú Chulainn as 'monuments' to his heroic abilities, and the dead bodies thus come to signify (primarily) in relation to Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn's encounter with the two sons of Nera mac Nuatair meic Tacáin (ll. 565–684) and with Ferchú Loingsech and his men (ll. 2510–2531) will be discussed to exemplify this.

Cú Chulainn's fight with Lóch mac Mo Febis is characterised by an engagement with proper heroic behaviour. Lóch initially refuses to fight Cú Chulainn because he deems it no honour to attack a youthful, beardless adversary. This shows Lóch to be concerned about the prerogatives of *fir fer*, according to which only grown men are worthy opponents whose killing concurs honour. As O'Leary (1991, 32) finds, there 'simply is not much glory in slaughtering a pre-pubescent opponent', a problem which Lóch faces because Cú Chulainn's beardlessness makes him *look* pre-pubescent. This demonstrates that the reading of bodies in terms of their appearance generates inclusion in or exclusion from the heroic discourse and that Cú Chulainn's beardlessness can be a serious obstacle in the narrated world of *TBC* II (although it is only mentioned in certain episodes). Lóch's initial refusal means that his younger brother Long is sent in his stead. When Long is killed by Cú Chulainn, Lóch is faced with a problem: he should and wants to avenge his brother, yet he can only do so honourably against a grown man, a category which Cú Chulainn is denied here because he lacks a beard. Only when Cú Chulainn smears on a beard of blackberry juice does Lóch agree to the fight. Strikingly, Lóch first has to observe the fake beard and then seeks spoken confirmation (based on *seeing* the beard) from another character, Medb: *Atchonnairc Lóch mac Mo Febhis sin, is edh adubairt: 'Ulc[h]a sút ar Coin Culainn.' 'As edh ón atchíu,' ar Medp* (Lóch mac Mo Febis saw this and said: 'This is a beard on Cú Chulainn.' 'That is what I see', said Medb).<sup>7</sup> The visual observance, the reading from the body, and the public assertion of what is seen, are enough to turn Cú Chulainn into an honourable opponent. Thus even before the fight, the text has raised the idea that bodies may be consciously manipulated with the aim of triggering a particular reading.<sup>8</sup>

After receiving several blows, Cú Chulainn enters his battle rage and fatally wounds Lóch with the *ga bulga*, piercing a *chridi 'na chliab* ('his heart in his breast').<sup>9</sup> The dying Lóch then utters the request for the proper posthumous instalment of his body. He says: *Ascid dam ifechtsa, a Chú Chulaind [...] Teilg*

7 *TBC* II, ll. 1980–1981. This and all subsequent references to the text are to O'Rahilly, 1969.

8 Somewhat contradictory to this, he then continues to fight with Cú Chulainn even when the Morrígan attacks the Ulster hero at the same time, thus effectively creating a fight against superior numbers for Cú Chulainn.

9 *TBC* II, l. 2004.

*traigid dam corop ar m'agid sair tóethus , nárap dar m'aiss siar co firu Hérend, arná rádea nech díb is roí madma nó techid dam remut-sa, dáig torchar din gae bulga* ('Grant me a favour now, Cú Chulainn [...] Retreat a step from me so that I may fall facing the east and not to the west towards the men of Ireland, lest one of them say that I fled in rout before you, for I have fallen by the *ga bulga*').<sup>10</sup> Cú Chulainn grants the wish on account that it is a warrior's request. O'Leary (1991, 40) argues that 'Cú Chulainn's response is exceptional precisely because he knows that it is just what more than one of the men of Ireland will say, and he nonetheless foregoes the glory of routing such a formidable foe [...]'. Although he does not actively manipulate the body, Cú Chulainn still allows it to signify in a certain way, to convey a certain message. For if Lóch had a dishonourable position in death, this might lead to the honour he gained during his lifetime being tragically compromised. This is a grave problem for such a renowned warrior, and one that in this particular case apparently can only be counteracted with the conscious positioning of his dying body.<sup>11</sup>

A very similar situation is found in an episode that shows analogous concerns, *Comrac fir Diad*. In this emotionally charged episode, Cú Chulainn finally kills Fer Diad by sending the *ga bulga* through his anus. His subsequent actions are described in detail: *Rabert Cú Chulaind sidi dá saigid assa aithle , ra iad a dá láim tharis, , túargaib leiss cona arm , cona erriud , cona étgud dar áth fathúaid é gombad ra áth atúaid ra beth in coscur , nábad ra áth aniar ac feraib Hérend* ('Then Cú Chulainn hastened towards him and clasped him in his arms and lifted him up with his weapons and armour and equipment and took him northwards across the ford so that his spoils might be to the north of the ford and not to the west with the men of Ireland').<sup>12</sup> Although (unlike Lóch) Fer Diad does not ask for it, out of foster-brotherly loyalty and concerns for Fer Diad's posthumous fame, Cú Chulainn grants him a last(ing) triumph through the positioning of his body. His action may express a concern that should Fer Diad be found on 'his' side of the ford (i.e. the side where he came from), this could imply that he did not attack valiantly or that he was fleeing from Cú Chulainn, especially since he is pierced by the *ga bulga* from behind (i.e. through his anus).

The deliberate and almost caring positioning of the body is paired with a rare—albeit implicit—reference to the body's appearance. O'Leary (1991, 42) first noted that Fer Diad's corpse is indeed accorded a respect that will win the dead man merit in the eyes of a watchful audience, but his living body is mangled to meet

10 *TBC* II, ll. 2004–2009.

11 Of course it is also possible that a dishonourable position of Lóch's body might compromise Cú Chulainn's heroic status, especially if it implied that he had killed Lóch from behind. However, since there is no indication given of Lóch having turned his back to Cú Chulainn, this possibility is not addressed here.

12 *TBC* II, ll. 3375–3378.



the expectations invoked by those very same judgemental eyes, whose presence weighs on and constrains both of the combatants.

In *TBC* II, Fer Diad's live body is openly wounded during the fight despite his horn-skin. Furthermore, after he dies it is clearly stated that he is stripped of his clothes and has to be cut open to remove the *ga bulga* (ll. 3486–3490). Although only the action and not the corpse is described, it is clear that this presents a gruesome picture to the—here only imagined—judgemental eyes of the (later-arriving?) Connacht army. Fer Diad's dead body carries the full semiotic meaning of the nature of his death. Although the careful positioning of the body may somewhat oppose the state of its flesh, it is clear that within the narrated world of *TBC* II, the position on this side of the ford will accord Fer Diad honour.

Both the Fer Diad and the Lóch episode show that Cú Chulainn is well aware that the bodies of his opponents will be read by the Connacht army at some later date and that he is responsible for how they are read. As O'Leary (1991, 41) points out, Cú Chulainn is under no compulsion to act as he does but he acknowledges that 'in the heroic ethos appearance can be synonymous with reality' and that his actions have a grave influence on the *fama* of his opponents. Since, as Sarah Sheehan (2013a, 133) has phrased it, 'early Irish society considered honour and shame to be important components of identity', and masculine-heroic identity in particular, the issue is of utmost importance for his opponents. The use of the *ga bulga* is also central to both episodes and may be an important key to understanding Cú Chulainn's behaviour. While Lóch is clearly hit in the heart (whether from the front or from behind is not stated, although his previous action would imply the former), it famously penetrates the anus of Fer Diad. This is apparently necessary since he has a horn-skin and, as is repeatedly pointed out in the text, cannot be overcome in any other way, even though during the fight *TBC* II abandons its own logic to pair the two foster-brothers in their wounding. Lóch only has a horn-skin in Recension I and that he is overcome with this special weapon in *TBC* II could be seen as a remnant of this version, although now un-horn-skinned he is saved from the dishonourable 'assault from the rear'.

Discussing this motif, Lowe (2003, 94) found that because horn-skinned warriors have 'rigid, armoured bodies when in combat' they can be said to be 'designed specifically to resist the destabilizing, subversive effects of violence. The harder they come, the harder they fall [...]'. Ann Dooley (1994, 127) has called Fer Diad's death by the *ga bulga* 'the greatest debasement of the male gendered heroic person'. The 'assault through the anus' motif has further been interpreted as showing homoerotic tendencies by Sheehan (2009). Yet one may also situate its problematic nature within a heroic rather than a gendered context: being hit from behind implies retreating. Testifying that neither Lóch nor Fer Diad were running

away is therefore of special importance to guarantee their posthumous fame, especially because the use of this special weapon might be particularly degrading.

What is crucial in relation to the warriors' deeds passing into posterity as *fama* is that in both cases, no witnesses to the fights are mentioned except for the charioteers. It is thus apparently not possible to have a direct transition from a communal or at least authoritative observation of the deed to turning it into future heroic discourse. Because of this (implied) absence of witnesses it appears that only the warriors' corpses are able to mediate the events of their deaths to the Connacht army: the corpses can be inspected later and thus fill the gap left by the apparent lack of eye-witnesses. In both cases, it is implied that they will be trusted as signifiers within the Connacht community.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the text quite clearly shows that the bodies can be—and are—manipulated. It is possible that this frank portrayal of the manipulation deliberately raises issues about relying on the reading of bodies in such contexts. For the 'writer' Cú Chulainn, however, the future honour of his opponents stands above petty concerns about (quite literally) rearranging the truth. To ascertain that what will be said about these two dead warriors is favourable is the main aim of the action, and in this Cú Chulainn is successful even across the temporal gap between arrangement and reading. Furthermore, through the described act of arrangement, the bodies also—again on a temporal axis—link the past of the fight with the implied future reading and even more future talking about the warriors' *fama*. These dead bodies, it seems, thus come to exemplify the perpetual nature of heroism in *TBC* II: they quite literally embody and mediate concerns about the nexus of passing heroic actions into future lore at the moment of death.

In the second group of examples, Cú Chulainn also deliberately installs dead bodies—or pieces of dead bodies—but this time it is to proof his own heroic abilities. Of course, the frequently mentioned brandishing or displaying of severed heads also falls within this category, but in *TBC* II far more memorable instalments can be found. At the very beginning of the cattle-raid, before he has even been seen by the Connacht army, Cú Chulainn encounters a Connacht spy-troop led by the two sons of Nera mac Nuatair meic Tacáin. Cú Chulainn has just erected an ogam-inscribed forked pole of four prongs and the two sons with their charioteers present the perfect addition to his 'monument', designed to keep the Connacht army from advancing:

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13 In *TBC* I in lines 2809–10, Láeg mentions that the four provinces of Ireland will come with Fer Diad to watch the fight. No such mention is made in *TBC* II. That Cú Chulainn can so openly manipulate Fer Diad's body without incurring shame suggests that this action is not being witnessed except by their charioteers, for it is doubtful if it would make sense to manipulate the body thus if people had *seen* the circumstances of his death.

*Impádar Cú Chulainn friu , tópacht a cethri cinnu díb colléic , tuc cend cech fir díb ara beind do bennaib na gabla. Ocus léicis Cú Chulaind eocho in fiallaig sin i n-agid fer ñHérend i frithdruing na sliged cétna , a n-éisse airslaichti , a méide forderga , cuirp na curad ic tindsaitin a fola sell sis for crettaib na carpat.*

Cú Chulainn attacked them and cut off their four heads from them (and from their charioteers) and impaled a head of each man of them on a prong of the pole. And Cú Chulainn sent the horses of that band back by the same road to meet the men of Ireland, with their reins lying loose and the headless trunks red with gore and the bodies of the warriors dripping blood down on to the framework of the chariots. ll. 568–573.<sup>14</sup>

The description stands out in *TBC* II for its vivid depiction of the mutilated bodies and its monumental nature that Lowe (2003, 87–88) has aptly termed ‘the spectacle of Cú Chulainn’s immediate victims’. The term is apt, not just because the arrangement of the corpses is spectacular, but also because it can aptly be linked to Sheehan’s use of the term ‘specularity’, as will be argued below.

A similar instalment is found in connection with Ferchú Loingsech. Ferchú and his eleven followers are Connachtmen but not part of Ailill and Medb’s invading army as they spend their time plundering behind the royal couple’s back. When Ferchú hears that a single man has held back the Connacht army, he and his men decide to kill him and present his head to Ailill and Medb to obtain peace. When they find Cú Chulainn, all twelve attack him at once, thus violating the conduct of *fir fer*. However, Cú Chulainn beheads them all and he *sádis dá lia déc leó i talmain. Acus atbert cend cach fir díb bara líic & atbert cend Ferchon Longsig ‘no bar[a] líic* (‘planted twelve stones for them in the ground and put a head of each one of them on its stone and also put Ferchú Loingsech’s head on its stone’).<sup>15</sup> Here a clear connection is made with the landscape, first by the erection of stones at the spot where the men died, and secondly by the subsequent naming of the place after the encounter. The erection of the memorial stones with the actual heads of the defeated warriors is a visible and gruesome reminder of Cú Chulainn’s victory. Whereas in the previous group of examples the bodies were openly shown to be presenting ‘not the whole truth’ about the fight, in this case they do not lie: they are a monument that makes Cú Chulainn’s strength and martial prowess visible across the gap of time and space. Interestingly, in both scenes there is an unusually gory element perceptible in the episode, yet Cú Chulainn does not mutilate the corpses any more than usual. He simply arranges the customarily cut off head and leaves the trunks to their own devices or sends them back in their chariots. It is the arrangement of the bodies, not a particularly gruesome mutilation of them, which makes the bodies exceptional.

<sup>14</sup> *TBC* II, ll. 568–573.

<sup>15</sup> *TBC* II, ll. 2528–2529.

The effect nevertheless hits home as Cú Chulainn's heroic abilities are made visible on the dead bodies of his opponents. The Connachtmen's deciphering of the bodies causes unease and in the case of the spy-troop, Fergus' explanation that this was the work of a single warrior capitalises Cú Chulainn's heroic status.<sup>22</sup> This is especially important in the episode about the spy-troop. For when a Connachtman meets Cú Chulainn face to face shortly afterwards, his boyish, beardless appearance at first masks his identity. The preceding episode thus visually establishes his martial superiority at a point in the text where it will be humorously inverted shortly afterwards. This also creates an open contradiction between Cú Chulainn's appearance and his abilities. Once again, the reading of a body (in relation to Cú Chulainn's beardlessness) does not reveal the whole truth—an idea with which *TBC* II can be said to engage with from various angles.

All four examples have shown that just like live bodies, dead bodies are read in various episodes of *TBC* II and that they are read in relation to very specific messages and can be installed by an outside force specifically to mediate this message. The medieval Irish literary tradition in general can be said to show a prominent engagement with dead bodies and history and connects this to space and landscape on various levels. Just like in the *Dindshenchas* tradition that customarily links geography and/or place (names) to death tales of warriors, some episodes in *TBC* II also link space, bodies and memory in various ways. This leads to a simultaneous spatialisation of history and historicising of space. It is therefore not surprising that the idea of connecting the *fama* or lasting memory of a warrior with the position of his body in death should also be found, as dead bodies can, at least for some time, preserve the nature of the death and hence function as an affirmation of honour or a complete debasement.

In both groups of examples, *TBC* II may also engage with another prevalent topos of early Irish literature, that of consciously looking at warriors. As Sheehan (2013b, 95) found, 'Irish sagas consistently represent beautiful male characters as objects of the gaze (...)'. To study such gazes, Sheehan (2013b, 96) introduced the term 'specularity', which she defines as 'to-be-looked-at-ness, a naturalized imperative to function as spectacle'. Often this spectacle is important for heroes to ascertain their fame. Although few prolonged instances of gazing at dead bodies for aesthetic or moral purposes are presented in *TBC* II (with the possible exception of Fer Diad), the future reading of—and from—the body implies that it will be gazed at in order to extract certain pieces of information from it. Yet while live warriors deliberately draw the gazes of others onto their bodies, in the case of dead bodies it is someone else—Cú Chulainn—who invites these gazes. Cú Chulainn exploits this custom by deliberately installing the bodies to communicate messages, or allowing Lóch to install his own body for that purpose. The corpses can thus signify either in relation to the dead warrior or in relation to the one who

killed them. It appears that while *seeing* is an important concept even in relation to corpses, it is a different kind of specularity, and a different kind of information, that is associated with dead bodies. This in turn is an indication of the nuanced and reflexive engagement early Irish saga literature can show with topics of heroic identity and memory.

Sheehan's term specularity is useful for the study of dead bodies also in that she sees it as 'an index of power, fame, and vulnerability' (2013b, 98). Because of his *riastrad* and his beardless face, Cú Chulainn at times suffers in relation to specularity in *TBC* II. By gazing at his body, his opponents fail to see the real potential of this warrior, or they place him in a monstrous or boyish rather than a heroic discourse. Although at times he consciously invites gazes on his beautiful body to counteract these assessments, it can be argued that in relation to his *riastrad* and his beardlessness, his body shows his vulnerability to public assessment and its difficult relationship with the fame he acquires through his actions. Could it therefore be that the hero, who consciously manipulates and installs but also compulsorily changes his own body, exploits these readings in relation to his opponents, deliberately making the readings favourable for honourable opponents while for dishonourable ones he uses them to exacerbate the humiliation? Or could the text itself engage with the difficulties of reading bodies on a meta-level, drawing attention to the idea that such readings might be faulty or insufficient because bodies can be manipulated? Or does a modern sense of truth not suffice to understand the importance of specularity and the realities it generates in early Irish texts? In either case, *TBC* II makes it clear that dead bodies are read as signifiers, and their reading is trusted within the heroic codex of *fir fer*. It would therefore appear that honour and shame were not just external and public, as O'Leary's quote above suggested, but that they were also visible on the body and had to be observed visually (through another body, so to speak) in order to become meaningful.

The previous brief discussions have shown that not just violence, but also the result of excessive violence—corpses—can be perceived in the narrated world as part of heroic discourse, and even as a means for critically engaging with this discourse. In both groups of examples, corpses generate a corporeal display of heroic identity. They are thus important not on an anatomical, moral or poetic level, but on a social level within the heroic cultural matrix portrayed in the text. This reflects the initial comment by Csordas (1990, 4) that bodies can be studied in relation to culture, as in these cases bodies make the heroic codex of the narrated world visible to the audience, while simultaneously affirming it for the other characters. Yet as has been briefly mentioned above, these bodies are always also expressions of a particular heroic character in *TBC* II: either they are important for the fallen warrior, or they become canvases on which Cú Chulainn's bodily abilities are made visible. The consciously installed dead bodies in these episodes

can thus be seen to signify both in relation to culture and individual characters in the narrated world.

This critical engagement with the reading of bodies can be seen as an extension of Lowe's (2003, 85) finding that 'the *Táin* questions and subverts the heroic ethos, rather than uncritically celebrating it'. A similarly critical engagement may be proposed for the initiation of *fama* and history by such means. In conclusion, it may therefore be argued that the attention the corpses receive in these episodes is not accidental but determined by such concerns about the very foundations of the heroic world of *TBC* II. This would suggest that the study of certain episodes allows for exploring concerns hitherto overlooked in the text at large and that these episodic approaches also show how spectacular (in a variety of senses of the word) bodies in *TBC* II can be. Even if one (personally) might not find the recounting of the deaths and the depictions of the dead bodies spectacular in the sense that they are dramatically impressive, the examples still testify for a spectacle of death: the corpses function in terms of specularity and with implied spectatorships, and they are located at the spectacular nexus of heroic behaviour and heroic reputation.

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